

Deep Time Rock Art in SW - Norway

Introduction

Rogaland in SW Norway has a large number of rock art sites within relatively limited geographical areas. I wish to present a long-lived rock art tradition that marked places within the landscape using five examples of significant rock art sites and the difference in choice of place and imagery. The carving activity and the interaction with the rock may have reinforced personal relationship and may have impacted upon memories of those producing rock art and of the wider social memory of audience (Enlander 2016: 46-47) which was not forgotten through generations in the region.

A number of theories and interpretations of rock art, and the ship's symbolic role in it, have been suggested throughout the years (Almgren 1927, Kaul 1998). Eva and Per Fett (1941) were among the first scholars to document and study the figurative composition in SW Norway. Their focus was on documentation, chronology and typologies in order to identify motifs and compositions as myths, rituals and other religious expressions e.g. also Althin 1945, Marstrander 1963, and Glob 1969. Flemming Kaul's interpretation of the sun's journey across the sky, its setting and rising again, as representing life, death and rebirth in an eternal cycle, and expressed in bronze objects, particularly Late Bronze Age razor blades, has played a major role in the interpretation of religion and cosmology in Bronze Age Scandinavia (Kaul 1998, 2004).

The earliest known report of rock art in Rogaland was published 150 years ago (Nicolaysen 1867). Since this initial registration, the number of open sites has increased to 111, stray-finds, including cupmarks and grave slabs, amount to 104 objects

(Høgestøl *et al.* 2018). In Scandinavia, the frequency of different motifs varies between regions. In Denmark, circular figures predominate, while animal and human figures are less frequent (Randsborg 1993: 82, Glob 1969: 96). The Bohuslän and Østfold rock art complexes have the largest concentration of human and animal motifs. These two are considered to be the most varied in terms of figure/scene compositions in all of Bronze Age Scandinavia (Randsborg 1993: 85). The ship motif comprises approx. 72 % of the rock art in Rogaland. Regional differences within Rogaland are noted in the choice and design of motifs. Chronologically, the ship motifs appear in the Early Bronze Age and continue, probably, into the very early Pre-Roman Iron Age (Malmer 1981, Mandt 1991, Kjeldsen 1993, Kaul 1998, Ling 2008). Apart from specific details in ship types, there is a strikingly little vari-

Fig. 1. Map of described Rock Art sites in Rogaland.



ation in the selection of motifs: cupmarks, circles, sun-cross/wheel-cross, foot-(soles), and geometric figures (Eva & Per Fett 1941, Høgestøl *et al* 1999, Nimura 2016). Rogaland stands out in its lack of animals, humans, anthropomorphic figures and objects. Ceremonial and ritual scenes are rare, warriors and battle scenes are completely absent.

Choice of place

The majority of the rock art in Rogaland can be found on the 5 km² island of Austre Åmøy. Parts of Austre Åmøy are typical of the North Jæren landscape, with slippery, exposed bedrock along the shoreline, the surfaces of which range from horizontal to almost vertical. The terrain rises steadily towards the center on the island.

Features and locations in the landscape may become significant over time through repeated human interaction, including visual interaction (where a feature attracts attention), bodily interaction (where feature is physically traversed), and social interaction (where a feature becomes incorporated into social memory) (Enlander 2016:47). Site I to X are distributed across a 1.5 km stretch of exposed bedrock along the island's southern shoreline, with the exception of two sites located on the northern side of the island. About 3000 BP the shoreline in the area was approx. 4.9 meters higher than today, dropping to around 3.5 meters above current levels by 2500 BP. In spite of the uncertainties in estimating prehistoric shoreline levels, waves must have washed over the carvings at Site I to X on a daily basis for at least 1000 years (Prøsch-Danielsen 1993, Høgestøl *et al* 1999). In total there are nearly 1200 carvings displaying a wide range of motifs. Based on the ship

types, the carving activity has been carried out through the Bronze Age (Malmer 1981, Mandt 1991, Kjeldsen 1993, Kaul 1998). The majority of the rock art panels are at ground level, monumental in scale, open and visible from the sea. Assuming that ships were a part of the everyday life of a coastal population, it is plausible that ships were also part of a Bronze Age mythology and cosmological beliefs-system based in a maritime ontology (Wrigglesworth 2010: 194-195). Bell (1992) suggests that ritualization strategies can be used as a power relationship between individuals and society as a complex strategy of organizing social norms, and not necessarily with any involvement of religious activities. Rock art may also serve as a medium intended to communicate the social position and social needs of maritime groups or actions

Fig. 2. *Hodnefjell* before excavation seen towards West.



in the maritime landscape (Ling & Cornell 2010:40).

The continued use of Austre Åmøy though the Bronze Age indicates the island must have played an important role in local societies, and the island thus could have been used as a large scale meeting grounds for ritual activities, to create certain traditions and become regionally distinct (Bell 1992, Sør-Reime 1987, 1989). The use of these sites over extensive periods of time may also result in the incorporation of rock art into different contexts/processes, including burials and collective memory (Enlander

2016). The Hodnefjell site, located on the southwest side of the island of Mosterøy, 13 km north of Austre Åmøy, is an example: the 7 m long rock has the shape of a whale back situated near several burial mounds (approx. 20-30 m.) which probably date from both from the Bronze- and Iron Ages. On the north side of the rock, 100 m from the shoreline, eighteen Early Bronze Age ships are carved along with 10 cupmarks. This is similar to the Early Bronze Age patterns/compositions at Austre Åmøy. However, compared to the Austre Åmøy sites, and in spite of the similarity in the early ship motifs, Hodnefjell does show some significant differences. The carved motifs are neither visible at a distance nor visible

Fig. 3. Hodnefjell during excavation with fire-cracked stones.



from the seaside. They seem hidden or shielded by natural landscape formations. In 2013, excavations were carried out in a narrow cleft between the carved rock surface and the opposite rock wall, which has no carvings. In front of the rock panel, evidence of activity such as charcoal and fire-cracked stones was identified. A C14 sample taken from an undisturbed layer in the cleft returned a rather surprising Late Bronze Age date 2433 ± 29 BP. Based on this result, the excavated site shows a high degree of time-depth, where special activities (including fire) have taken place near and in connection with the rock carvings, and likely activity in connection with the burial mounds as well. It is unknown why there are few and for me uncertain Late Bronze Age ship motifs (as fig. 14, 18), in spite of the use of the site in these periods (Fett 1941: 28, pl. 4 D). It may be that Early Bronze Age ship continued into the Late Bronze Age. The proven time-depth shows that the *place* had a symbolic value before the carvings were

made, while the lack of Late Bronze Age ships shows that the place was never forgotten, anchoring the rock carvings and the location into later use, tradition and social memory.

Visible and hidden Rock Art

Vigdel, Hellestø and Kråkhaug are located within 3 km of each other and, apart from Kråkhaug, within 100 m of the sea. In the Early Bronze Age 1700 BC (per I), the sea level at Vigdel and Hellestø was about 5 meters higher than today. At the beginning of the Late Bronze Age, 1100 BC (per IV), the sea level was 2.5 m higher than present day (Fett 1941, Myhre 1980, Høgestøl 2018 *et al*).

Vigdel is located on the east side of a vertical rock along the shore. The carvings are dot pecked, shallow lines, and consist of single-line ships apart from two with pecked/filled hull. The composition of the images are unique for Rogaland: a human figure in procession holding a raised axe in one hand (documented and discovered in 2006), and an "adorant" in a boat with arms raised towards the sky (Fett pl. 39C: 1941). On the same rock formation there

are several broad undulating, white quartz stripes. Hellestø has a similar location, similar rock surface, shallow lines, and equal dot pecking as Vigdel. The carvings are on the east-southeast side of a vertical rock. Beyond ship motifs, there is only one other design, a sun-cross/wheel-cross. The ship types at Hellestø are Late Bronze Age, as at Vigdel, but differ slightly due to two single-line ships with horseheads carved in the stern (Fett 1941).

Kråkhaug has sixteen dot pecked motifs on a 1.5 meters high vertical rock face with a view to the lake Harvalandsvatnet (Myhre 1980). The ships are single-line carvings (Late Bronze Age), and the dot pecked lines are shallow, like the Hellestø and Vigdel carvings. One scene shows intercourse between a man and a woman. Next to the pair is a shorter figure, as well as an oversized, headless figure holding an axe. The oversized figure is located higher on the rock, observing the three people. Two animal figures of indeterminate nature is situated in connection to a ship figure. Goldhahn (Goldhahn & Østigård 2007) connects rock art, bronze casting, ceramics production, cremation and the pressure flaking technique (flint, quartz), to activi-

Fig. 4. Vigdel seen towards West.





Fig. 5. Ritual scene at Vigdel.

ties performed by the same people, the same institution of ritual specialists. He posits the bronze smith as cosmologist, with knowledge of life and death, knowledge of various technologies and mediums, and responsible for transition rituals. A somewhat similar scene between man and woman, with an animal of indeterminate nature (possibly dog), and surrounded by ships, is depicted at Austre Åmøy Site I. Anthropomorphic/human images and scenes are, as mentioned, rare in the region. The local variation between Austre Åmøy and the other described sites is clear. Almost every type of image and scene known from Rogaland is also depicted at Austre Åmøy. Vigdel, Kråkhaug and Åmøy Site I and IV have scenes involving anthropomorphic/human figures performing rituals. These scenes could as Kaul (1998) suggests, be pictures of rituals in action. It appears, that there is a shift from the Early Bronze Age with the dominance of stylistic images (ship, cup-

mark, circle, geometric figures) to sites with ritual scenes that involve anthropomorphic/human figures, objects and animals in Late Bronze Age.

Concluding remarks

Four localities, apart from the Austre Åmøy sites (described above), have certain common features which I presume, has influenced their being chosen for rock art in the Late Bronze Age: vertical rocks, near the sea, not visible at distance, not visible from the seaside, near pastures and arable lands. There is an antagonism between the open and closed landscape settings and the visibility of rock art. Some rock panels in open landscape settings seem to have been shielded behind other landscape features, as at Hodnefjell, Vigdel and Hellestø. However, it is still important to have the connection to water and the maritime environment.



Fig. 6. Hellestø seen towards North-West.

I assume the majority of the rock art in Rogaland conformed to strict conventions, and that the different motifs relate in some manner e.g. ship – circle, animals - anthropomorphic/human and objects. This may have been organized by a “ritual specialist” and performed by esoteric groups as Goldhahn (Goldhahn & Østigård 2007) suggests. Vigdel, Hellestø and Kråkhaug have several visible features in common: equal dot pecking, single-line ships, anthropomorphic/human figures, which altogether gives the impression of activity by the same group. The restricted range of motifs (dominated by ships), indicates that there is a deep time constant and inherent unity in the choice of both motifs and symbolism in the artistic tradition. This could also explain the many repeated motifs was produced with some common rituals, symbolism and tradition in mind.

Although the number of rock carvings decreases the further south in the region

one looks, the ship motif is still dominant, water and sea is still important, the iconography seems constant and immutable. This aspect is interesting as other studies of the Bronze Age shows partly dramatic changes in other spheres of society, such as grave practice (Goldhahn 1999). This supports my idea that certain ontological aspects in rock art tradition did not change dramatically in Rogaland SW Norway.

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